September 16, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

The E-rate program has been enormously effective in assisting schools to provide access to technology. Thanks to E-rate, students have been able to use multi-media applications that are personalized, interactive, and engaging. We're now using iPads in preschools and primary-grade classes, tablets, laptops and computers in upper elementary, middle and high schools, and Skyping in experts, students in other classes, and classes in other parts of the country or the world, which has transformed student learning.

As the E-rate program gets modernized, it is imperative that funding for new fiber deployments is prioritized. In a recent survey, more than 50% of schools, with hundreds of users, reported that they have lower bandwidth than the typical home where bandwidth serves four. Teachers cannot use technology that is unreliable, and unless there is sufficient bandwidth and funding for modern, high-speed Wi-Fi networks, they will default back to boring and obsolete textbooks.

For equity, it would be best if funding is allocated on a simple, per-pupil basis, and if there was a speedy review of E-rate applications. More consortium purchasing would help to lower prices, and funding or special pricing options should be available to families or community hotspot locations in the vicinity of schools in low-income areas.

Recognizing the extraordinary demand for E-rate funding, it's time to phase out funding for services like paging and directory assistance, and put those dollars to better use.

We are most appreciative of all that the E-rate program has done for schools since its establishment in 1997. It has brought schools in to the modern era in a faster time frame than would otherwise have been possible. Now we need to get the rest of the way there.

Sincerely,

Barbara Nemko, Ph.D.
Napa County Superintendent of Schools